

Mélenchon sets nationalist trap for opposition to austerity in France

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7 September 2017

The strategy proposed by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in his closing speech at the summer school of Unsubmissive France (LFI) in Marseille, in opposition to President Emmanuel Macron's attack on the Labor Code, is a trap for workers and youth seeking a way forward in the struggle against austerity.

What is required is to unify workers in Europe in a revolutionary struggle against austerity and militarism. As social anger rises throughout the continent, Mélenchon is opposed to a revolutionary strategy. Instead, he wants to launch a populist and nationalist movement within the borders of France, compatible with a strategy of entry into a Macron government.

In his speech, Mélenchon insisted that he was not addressing “organized workers”, but the “people”. Far from struggling to break the organizational influence over the workers of the union bureaucracies that negotiate the decrees with Macron, he accepts it. However, knowing that the trade unions are largely discredited, Mélenchon wants to bind workers and young people who would mobilize independently from the trade unions to a populist movement controlled by himself.

Hence the call for a demonstration outside of the one organized by the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union: “On September 23, the people must invade Paris against the social and the antidemocratic coup d’état that has been organized against them.” He added: “In a few nights, the entire Labor Code was destroyed. The powerful, when they give you a moment to chat with them, well it is because they feel that discussion is possible only if they win in the end.”

While he criticizes Macron’s policies, Mélenchon opposes them from a chauvinist perspective. He has already downplayed France’s responsibility for the deportation of Jews under the Nazi Occupation and applauded the criticism of Macron by Army Chief of Staff General Pierre de Villiers, who was hostile to Macron’s

military budget cuts. In his closing speech, Mélenchon denounced workers from Eastern Europe working in France on low wages, just as Macron has done.

While Macron and the whole European bourgeoisie are destroying social gains, he singled out foreign workers for attack: “The status of the detached worker is not acceptable, we have not accepted it, and if we are responsible for this country, there would not be a single detached worker in France.”

This makes particularly clear that Mélenchon proposes a political dead end to workers seeking to defend their social rights against Macron's attacks. His perspective has nothing to do with a socialist and revolutionary strategy for the working class against European capitalism. He is accommodating himself to the domination of workers’ mobilisations by the empty shells of the trade unions, around which he aims to develop a populist movement cut off from the natural allies of French workers: the workers of the rest of Europe and the world.

The nationalist orientation and the division of labor with the unions Mélenchon proposes testify to the class chasm separating him from the Socialist Equality Party (PES). The state of emergency and the repudiation by the European bourgeoisie of the social rights won by the working class over generations of struggle in the 20th century reflect a historic crisis of capitalism. But Mélenchon is hostile to a struggle for the political independence of the proletariat and to a revolutionary struggle of the proletariat for socialism, modeled on the October 1917 revolution.

He wants to make alliances with the security apparatus that imposes the state of emergency and repressed protests against the labor law in 2016. In his closing speech to the LFI summer school, Mélenchon insisted that his movement must be compatible with exercising governmental power, as prime minister, for example, under Macron’s presidency: “We must be ready to

govern at all times. If we had to, tomorrow we would be ready to govern.”

Mélenchon said he wanted to collaborate with Macron’s ministers, declaring: “Minister Nicolas Hulot has announced that he will organize a plan to stop using hydrocarbons. We will observe it with interest, and whenever it is necessary, we will help”. Mélenchon said that if the government were to close the 17 nuclear reactors, he would support it and applaud it.

After thanking the city of Marseille for its hospitality, Mélenchon also hailed the police who “ensured our protection.”

He added, “Please, we know that a lot of money is being channeled to give you material means to carry out repression. We understand the tasks entailed in maintaining public order, but we believe in a police force that is a guardian of peace, not a police force that attacks the people. And you, the policemen loyal to the principles of the French Republic, intervene to stop the absurd methods put in place by [PS Interior Minister Bernard] Cazeneuve, which consists of encircling demonstrators and then throwing tear gas at them.”

Mélenchon’s appeals to police under a state of emergency are a warning to workers. Mélenchon, who wishes to govern under Macron, is looking for an alliance with the police and the army; it is not by chance that he supported de Villiers after the general was dismissed for protesting against Macron’s military budget cuts.

His reactionary appeals to the police, aimed at sowing confusion on the state of emergency and disarming workers against the dangers of a dictatorship in France, will not stop police from attacking workers and youth protesting against Macron. On the other hand, they indicate that Mélenchon will not seriously oppose police assaults against protesters.

Mélenchon’s support for the police and the state of emergency also highlights the political gulf between LFI and the millions of people who voted for Mélenchon in the presidential election. He gained support among large sections of youth and workers in the first round of the presidential elections, protesting against social inequality and Trump’s bombing of Syria.

In the runoff between Macron and Le Pen, Mélenchon abdicated his political responsibilities and flatly refused to give a political line. He trampled on the vote of his own supporters, who were favorable to the active boycott advocated by the PES, in order to prevent the emergence of a large and powerful opposition on the left of Macron. This has led to the current situation, where Macron is

allowed to prepare his attacks with unions, faced with the purely verbal opposition of a handful of LFI deputies in the Assembly.

Mélenchon relies on a false historical and political perspective in defense of the Socialist Party and the anti-Trotskyist policies of the post-1968 pseudo-left: “We are aware of our responsibilities, the French people placed us at the top of the first round in tens of cities in the country. So it is up to us, after more than 40 years, where it was the PS which led us to the point that you saw. If so much was gained in the past, it should not be forgotten. Nobody can forget all that the Common Program brought us, no one can forget how we got our 5th week of paid holidays.”

This comment highlights the anti-Trotskyist perspective underlying the nationalist, pro-union, and pro-police strategy of LFI. The Common Program was not a victory but a trap for the working class. While the French Communist Party’s (PCF) influence diminished among the workers because of its betrayal of the May-June 1968 general strike, forces that had broken with Trotskyism, various social democrats and anarchists, and petty-bourgeois intellectual circles gathered around François Mitterrand, the bourgeois and ex-Vichy politician who founded the Socialist Party (PS).

It is on this perspective that Mélenchon—a former member of the Internationalist Communist Organization of Pierre Lambert, which broke with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and allied with the Union of the Left between the PS and the PCF—joined the PS. And after its victory in the presidential elections in 1981 and its “austerity turn” in 1982-1983, the PS proved to be a party of the financial aristocracy, leading brutal attacks on social programs and deindustrialising entire regions.

Mélenchon’s promotion of this reactionary political legacy underscores that he is not trying to mobilize the struggling workers, but corral them into a new trap after the PS’s political disintegration.



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